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ABSTRACT

School readiness encompasses two different terms in Estonia: school maturity and school readiness. School maturity involves stages in growth a child experiences up to a certain level of development. School readiness involves that point in development at which a child is ready to enter school. Because children develop at different rates, ways should be found that allow pupils to develop in their own ways and in accord with their ability. Consequently, schools should take more responsibility in meeting children's individual needs; in other words, they should be ready to accept a heterogeneous student body and adjust teaching methods accordingly. Teachers can be trained in the fields of child development and teaching methodologies so they can notice difficulties and strengths of individual pupils, evaluate problems, and apply an appropriate teaching solution. Instruction should be challenging but not frustrating. Instilling motivation to learn should be among teachers' goals. Different learning profiles (styles) need to be recognized. The classroom environment should be tolerant and supportive of different and divergent opinions and critical analyses, so learners can come to understand that their opinions are valued. Teaching social norms and self-control should also be included in the curriculum. (Contains 32 references.) (RT)

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School Readiness or School`s Readiness?

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For decades, school readiness and school maturity have been viewed as the child's readiness to adjust to school. Okon, for instance, defines children as school "ready" when their physical, intellectual, and social development is sufficient to enable them to meet school requirements and to assimilate curriculum content (Okon 1973). The aim of such a definition was to accept into school an equally prepared, homogeneous group who would advance in their studies at a similar pace and acquire an equally good education. In accordance with the changes in views and knowledge about the child development, the means for achieving and defining school readiness has also changed.

1. School Readiness

In English, the phrase "school readiness" are used to capture what we in Estonia see as two different terms: ***school maturity*** and ***school readiness***. When speaking about school maturity, educators focus on the child and his/her development at the end of his/her pre school years (Tulva, Kolga, 1984).The maturity based approach focuses on the process of maturation. According to this approach, all children experience similar stages in their growth, the only difference being in the time the process takes. In order to reach the necessary stage of school maturity, some children simply require more time than others. Therefore, they need to spend another year in the kindergarten or postpone the beginning of school.

The maturity based approach is associated with the pioneering work of A. Gesell in the 1940s and 50s. The understanding that boys mature more slowly and therefore should go to school later than girls, for instance, is explained by this theory. The maturity based approach lost much of its popularity in the 1960s and 70s. Most children participating in experiments who evidenced early signs of trouble continued experiencing adjustment problems and learning difficulties later on at school (Crnic, Lamberty, 1994, Gredler, 1980, Smith & Shepard, 1988).

School readiness, which embodies both school maturity and preparation for school (Tulva, Kolga, 1984) has served as a basis for decision-making. This notion takes into account both the demands of the school and the child's need to adjust to school. As such, the approach results in sending children to special schools and special classes as well as grouping children according to their abilities within a class.

Further investigation, however, indicated that grouping and separating children on the basis of their abilities deepens the differences in the learning outcomes (Shaywitz, Holford et al., 1995, Shepard & Smith, 1989). According to the UN Convention of the Rights of Child (Adopted in Estonia 08.06.1992), every child has the right to an education that gives the pupil the possibility to develop in his or her own way and according with his or her ability. The main question then is not whether the child is ready to adjust to the school environment; instead, we should ask whether the school

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is ready to meet the needs and particularities of the child. Thus, alongside or instead of **school maturity/school readiness** we should discuss more particularly the **readiness of the school**.

2. School`s readiness

This understanding that school and teachers ought to take more responsibility for readiness has grown in popularity (Kagan, 1995, Lewit, Schuurmann, Baker, 1995, Cooney, 1995). A similar direction is apparent in special pedagogy as evidenced by terms such as *integration, mainstreaming and inclusion*. All people are different and all children are capable of developing according to their potential, proponents of this position believe; success in this case depends on the environment and teaching provided. In that case, what matters most is creating a school and classroom environment that satisfies the different needs of all students. (Farran, Shonkoff, 1994).

Naturally, there are situations and children whose special needs make it difficult or even impossible to for them to adjust to an ordinary school, or an ordinary school to them. But the decision to remove a child from an ordinary school cannot be made by the school alone. Rather, it must be a mutually agreed upon decision, considered carefully by the parent, child, school, teacher, and specialist which puts the interests of the child at the fore. The only clear criterion for acceptance into school should be chronological age (Shore, 1998, EV Haridusseadus 1992). ***Schools*** should be ***ready*** to accept a heterogeneous student body and adjust teaching according to the needs and abilities. of their students.

3. Teacher's readiness

Learning/teaching is above all an interaction between the persons involved: the teacher serves as the mediator between the learner and the learning matter (Hall, 1998). The readiness of the school then, depends largely on the teacher's readiness to notice, understand, and help his/her students.
The teacher's readiness consists of two aspects:

1) training in the field of child development and special needs that would form the bases for noticing difficulties and problems as well as the talents and strengths of every individual;
2) training in the field of teaching methodologies that would form the basis for evaluating the situation as well as seeking and selecting appropriate teaching solutions.

The teacher is the actual person who either differentiates or does not differentiate the learning tasks. Ideally the teacher should use:

a) different ways of presenting the subject;
b) different activities where the learners could render meaning to the learning material and acquire it according to their own level and personal experience;
c) different opportunities for the learners to demonstrate what they have acquired (Tomlinson 1995).

3.1. Recognising the individuality of every learner

Just as society consists of people with very different abilities, interests, experiences, and possibilities, the student body of a class also reflects the same kind of variety and abundance of possibilities. Good teaching should take these differences into account, adjusting the material and suitable methodologies. Instruction should be at the challenging level (Shall, Kurtis, 1996). This is in accordance with Vygotsky's models of the zone of proximal development and Betts' term, "instructional level," i.e., the tasks that the learner is unable to tackle independently but can solve with the help or guidance of an adult or a peer. The level cannot be too high. Betts calls the level that cannot be achieved even with the help of the teacher the "frustration level" because of its frequent effect (Betts, 1946, Vygotsky, 1982). Too low a level does not foster growth and does not support the child's potential. In either case, the interest and motivation fade.

"What is it," we might ask, "that allows a teacher to provide appropriate opportunities for their students? Key to a successful programme is helping learners connect the material that needs to be taught to their own experience and knowledge.
Students must also have an opportunity to define their own goals and needs as well as be ready to present and support their viewpoints. "Once students are free to speculate, diversity of opinion and ideas will emerge. It is necessarily the case that when the belief that there is only one right answer is abandoned, there will often emerge as many opinions as there are students (Steele, Meredith, Temple, Walter, 1998, pp.17). In this way, differences in knowledge, the perception of the world in a wider sense, and values become apparent. The teacher receives more information about the background of the individual learners. The essential aim and requirement of the programme is to accept and value differences. Ideally, the teacher's aim is to concentrate not on the weaknesses and deficiencies of students, but to emphasise strengths and resources.

Neither the "average level" nor the "average child" exists. The background knowledge and skills of the learners differ; on the other hand, the learning styles and approaches also vary. Frequently, approach depends on the preferences for different modalities (sight, hearing, doing) and/or previous experiences. Whereas some children prefer to learn quietly making notes, others like discussing things with their mates, and still others prefer practical trial. Preferences of different ways of learning are called learning profiles (Tomlinson, 1995) or cognitive styles (Tomusk,1991). The use of varied methodologies enables the teacher to take into account the learners' individuality and preferences.

3.2. Using different teaching methods and creating supportive environment

The use of methodologies that support different learning styles enables learners to enlarge their awareness and knowledge of themselves. Introducing and modelling learning strategies provides the opportunity to direct and influence their growth.
In the traditional classroom with the students sitting in rows behind each other, it is difficult to start a dialogue. Increasing the opportunities for peer interaction, working in pairs, and smaller or larger groups also increases the learners' active engagement. Classmates come to know one another better and children open sides that in the ordinary *teacher – presenter, learner – receiver* relationships tend to remain hidden.

The role of the teacher as the direct source of knowledge shifts to that of mediator and guide. Experience suggests that the collective knowledge of learners can be surprisingly big and sharing the knowledge with peers – teaching each other – very effective. There need not be the concern that the learners with more knowledge gain less from the process. Their knowledge does not decrease; on the contrary, the new role and opportunity to present what has been learned often increases their motivation and stimulates them to acquire new knowledge independently. For these methods to work, teachers must promote a tolerant atmosphere where different opinions are welcomed and accepted and no one is ridiculed. In order to encourage the learners to think independently, it is essential to let them know that their opinions and critical analyses are precious. Restricting the expression of different opinions means to restrict the learners' thinking (Steele, Meredith, Temple, Walter, 1998).

The understanding that the teacher should have the opportunity to make decisions about organising the learning process and, thus, the opportunity to **take more responsibility for own action** is central. Research indicates that learning outcomes become poorer when the right to decide how and what to teach is taken away from the teacher (Amspaugh, 1993). The teacher has to function as creator and guide as well as co-operative partner. At the same time it cannot be assumed that the teacher is free from her own cognitive or teaching style preferences and that all methodologies and strategies suit her equally well. The teacher also has the freedom to try and select methods she feels suit her better and seem more pleasant.

4. The learner's school readiness

The learner's school readiness has mostly been viewed from three aspects: physical, cognitive and social.

4.1 Physical readiness

Height, weight etc. have never been directly considered as a criterion for admission. Still, such factors are seen as indirect determinants in considering the age to begin school. The child can go to school when s/he is ready to get to school independently. That is also given as a reason why children in Northern countries go to school at an older age.

4.2. Cognitive readiness

Work at school is often seen as tied to cognitive readiness. Frequently, it is viewed as the total of knowledge and skills. Still, it is more often important to observe learning and teaching as a process rather than a product. By the time the child goes to school, the first **communicative skills** should have developed – the child should understand the speech of adults and peers and s/he should be able to express his/her knowledge, thoughts, wishes, and feelings in a comprehensible way. It should be born in mind that children come from different environments and their communicating ways and experiences differ. Some children are more reserved and shy at the beginning of school and forcing them to comply with expectations may do more harm than good (Katz, McClellan, 1991). The example set by others, together with the fact that nobody is ridiculed and nobody's opinion is considered "right" or "wrong" creates a

safe atmosphere for self-expression. The aim is the free exchange of ideas. Small children are well able to think sophisticated thoughts, generate ideas, and analyse them critically. Communicative skills are tightly connected with both academic skills, especially with the development of reading and writing skills, and with the successful formation of social relationships.

Often, school maturity is regarded from the point of view of the reading skills. Students who do not "learn to read" during the first three years of school experience enormous difficulty when they are subsequently asked to "read to learn" (NCITE, 1996). Therefore, at the beginning of school the emphasis is often disproportionately laid on teaching reading techniques. Although this is essential, it is also important not to forget the aim of acquiring **literacy,** and retain the children's interest and desire to use it. Literacy involves the ability to learn facts, overall understanding, and using information for analyses and divergent thinking (Blair, 1998). From the very beginning of school, children should be taught critical literacy through both oral and written forms. Literacy is a social, not a developmental skill.

The teaching must be centred on developing concepts and vocabulary, broadening overall knowledge, and teaching comprehension strategies like summarising, predicting, observing etc. Children are decoders – *how do I know it?* -, participants in the text – *what does it mean?* -, users of the text – *what can I do with it?* -, analysts and estimators of the text – *what meaning does it have to me?* – (Hall, 1998).

Both **learning skills and strategies** need to be taught which focuses not simply on facts and knowledge, but on their use. The aim is to help children develop into independent thinkers and lifelong learners (Steele, Meredith, Temple, Walter, 1998). Research indicates that learning difficulties developed in the early school years tend to persist and deepen. Ineffective learning strategies or rather undeveloped effective learning strategies diminish the child's, the teacher's and the school's potential.

4.3. Social readiness

During the last two decades a convincing body of evidence has accumulated to indicate that unless children achieve minimal social competence by about six years, they have a high probability of being at risk throughout life (McClellan, Katz, 1993). The first weeks of school are of critical importance (Ladd, 1990). Teacher has to survey how children adjust to their peers at the beginning of school and also direct the formation of group relationships. Flexible grouping and encouraging children to communicate fosters adjustment and mixing.

The ability to co-operate and share is also of great importance. Cooperation means, if you give you also get (Steele, Meredith, Temple, Walter, 1998). The sharing of knowledge enriches all parties. Sharing is an important ability for life. Co-operation presupposes active engagement in setting goals and making decisions within the group, that in its turn requires good communicative abilities, empathy and tolerance, and the ability to reach the goal through discussion and negotiation, instead of aggression. If such skills are not acquired at an early age, there is the tendency that ineffectual patterns of peer social interaction persist over time and across settings, resulting in continued rejection even when the child changes groups (Doherty, 1997).

Knowledge of the norms of conduct and the ability to control one's conduct also form a part of social skills. Acting in school, group, or collective requires the establishment and following of certain rules. The children who are unaware of these rules or who do not follow them are in danger of becoming cast out by their peers. Discussion in the classroom helps to establish and follow rules as well as monitor their observance by children themselves. Through discussion and dispute, children not only learn to argue but also to listen, consider, wait for their turn, give positive feedback, support their sympathisers, and respect the opponents. Rules are better accepted when they are not forced upon the children from the outside, but established as the result of a discussion.

Motivation is also very important. Achievement depends first and foremost on interest and will. Teaching builds on the knowledge and experience of the child, enabling him/her to use suitable learning styles and strategies, and guaranteeing the freedom to have and to express one's opinion. Just as the teacher has the right to choose and decide, students, too, need control over their actions. The teacher's goal is to create conditions where the learners can take responsibility for their learning, are maintain interest and motivation.

Arranging the child's development into periods, Erikson claimed that the beginning of school is a time of decisive importance in the formation of **self-evaluation**. The child who lacks self-confidence spends much energy on struggling with the fear of failure without daring to try something new. Learners must know that their opinions are valued. Without self-confidence and belief in their value, learners' lack courage to think independently (Steele, Meredith, Temple, Walter, 1998).

The best bases for predictions about successful adult life are not childhood IQ, school grades, or the conduct in the classroom but **relationships with peers**. Children who are disliked by their peers because of their aggressive or annoying conduct, who are unable to create close relationships with their peers or find their own place among peers, will probably cause problems all their life (Hartup, 1992).

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